

ADAMANT

March 23, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"...the Lord God helps me,...I have not been confounded; therefore I set my face like a flint;..." --Isaiah 50:7 (RSV)

Scripture
Isaiah 50:4-9a

The ultimate risk is not dying but living without significance. There is a sense in which human history is the story of the men and women who decided that dying is not as important as living committed lives.

In the United Nations Building in New York City there is a magnificent Marc Chagall stained glass window, created in memory of his friend, Dag Hammarskjold, the second Secretary General of the United Nations. The stunningly beautiful window is even more impressive when one learns about the struggles and doubts of the man and his anxiety about the meaning of his life. We are privileged to know about that because Hammarskjold kept a journal, published posthumously under the title, Markings. He died, significantly, not in old age, but in full career, in harness, in an airplane crash while on a U.N. peacemaking mission in Africa.

The title of this Palm Sunday sermon is borrowed from a journal entry which deals with the issues of risk and life and death and meaning and this day...

"A young man, adamant in his committed life. The one who was nearest to him relates how, on the last evening, he arose from supper, laid aside his garments, and washed the feet of his friends and disciples - an adamant young man, alone as he confronted his final destiny.

"He knew that not one of them had the slightest conception why he had to act in the way that he must. He knew how frightened and shaken they would all be.

"He had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had the first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross. He knew, though, that he had to follow it,

still uncertain as to whether he was the one who shall bring it to pass, but certain that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end. The end might be a death without significance.

"A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he had chosen." [Markings, pp. 68-69]

Hammar skjold was writing about Jesus on Palm Sunday, of course, and the terrible risk he assumed when he came to the city, namely the possibility that his decisions might result in a death without significance. Hammar skjold was writing about a very human Jesus, who was torn between the impulse to trust God for his future and the natural instinct we know about, to play it safe, to protect himself. It is that human Jesus who speaks so powerfully to us when he actually does trust God and walk into the week adamantly. And Hammar skjold was writing about himself, his life and the issues which called to him and required lonely decisions and brave commitment with no guarantees. And therefore he was writing about us.

But first - the day - the event, the victorious, albeit temporary, parade for Jesus. It seems uncomplicated. A charismatic young leader comes to the capitol city and is welcomed as a hero. His friends and backers tear the branches from the trees and the clothing from their back and make his entrance a demonstration of sorts. Just slightly beneath the surface there is an element of political intrigue. Judas, for instance, is hoping that the noisy demonstrations will set off a general revolt against Rome, that Jesus will throw in with the revolution - and then the betrayal out of a sense of desperation or disappointment because it doesn't happen that way.

Just slightly beneath the surface there is a nervous claqué of priests and politicians, trying to orchestrate everything that is happening in Jerusalem so that during Passover week the celebration will not disturb the Roman authorities; ready - if necessary - to meet in the middle of the night to try, convict and condemn trouble-makers.

Directly on the surface is the crowd, the onlookers, the parade-watchers, who today tear branches from the trees and shout Hallelujah, and tomorrow will have forgotten about him and by Friday will be back for another spectacle, public execution.

Striding through the middle of it, indeed at the center of it all, the lonely, adamant young man whose courage caught the imagination of Dag Hammar skjold: and whose moral example inspired him as he made his own lonely decisions and which beckons to each of us so compellingly this day.

Why go to the city? Why not remain in remote safety of Galilee where he might have lived to old age? Why not stay in Galilee, practice carpentry, do a little teaching, slowly bring along the disciples and give maturity an opportunity to moderate the intensity of this 33 year old radicalism? He decided to go to Jerusalem - "set his face toward Jerusalem" is the descriptive way the Gospel tells it, because he was not

content with Galilee, the periphery. His own integrity demanded that he confront the life of the city. And so he decided to ignore the cautious advice of the people who loved him best. He knew the risks.

But the greatest risk of all, Hammar skjold suggests is not dying, but life without significance, living without meaning and purpose - which would mean a death without significance. Jesus did not know how it would turn out. He did not know that he would not be forgotten as quickly as the thousands of other disturbers of the peace Rome had executed.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who has done some spiritual struggling himself, hears Jesus agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of arrest: "Let this cup pass from me...not just the arrest, the ignoring, the harrassment, the trial and execution with all its grisly accompaniments; rather, the sense of failure;..." [Jesus, p. 160]

That is the final and ultimate risk: not death, but that one should have lived without significance, without mattering. And the best part of this day is that it focuses, without obstruction, on the man who faced that risk, embraced it in full view, for the centuries to witness, the man who did it defining what is best and most noble and most promising about our humanity - this adamant young man.

The Courage to Be, the late Paul Tillich called it - "the ethical act in which we affirm our own being...the affirmation of one's self that always produces joy." [The Courage to Be, pp. 3-14] Poets and playwrights and novelists often deal with the issue. At its most personal level, each of us has to decide that our lives are worthwhile. We must affirm our being, in Tillich's language - decide to be, to live, to have meaning. A powerful drama playing locally, 'night Mother, focuses on the decision of a middle-aged woman to commit suicide because there simply is no significance to her life. The audience is appalled with the decision and is pulled into the struggle - desperately trying - with the woman's own mother - to convey to her that her life is valuable, pleading with her to affirm it.

The danger is that we broker away our lives, compromise our commitments, accept the status quo, allow others to make our decisions, and as a consequence never become someone on our own, someone authentic and whole and free. Rollo May thinks that we live in a time that conspires against our individuality, a heavy, complex time that flattens us out and makes us feel small, inconspicuous and unimportant. "Men and women become fully human," he writes, "only by their choices and their commitment to them." May speaks for many when he warns that the issues facing us in our time are so huge and so complex and so fearsome that the instinct of the individual is to retreat, hide, find a hole and jump in. "To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent." [The Courage to Create, p.2]

Who hasn't felt that? How can an individual today even

understand the complex issues that confront our society, let alone contribute to their resolution? What can I do about hunger? About health care and education and the environment and the nuclear arms race? The very catalog makes us wring our hands in despair.

This day however celebrates the courage of an adamant young man. This day suggests that our humanity is at stake when we abdicate responsibility for the world and the specific issues that are besetting our society. What is at stake, this day suggests, is not just the welfare of the race, but our own souls.

This day celebrates the adamant courage of Jesus. It is also the occasion to remember that this day he thrust the Gospel, the Christian religion, into the center of human life. Adamantly he moved, literally from the periphery to the center: from remote countryside to the vital and dangerous capitol city.

There is a venerable tendency in religion to remain on the periphery, to keep religion out on the edges. It is one of the hoariest traditions in American piety. It is not something we learned from the Jewish founders of Christianity. They understood that it is not possible to separate religion from life, to differentiate between the secular and the sacred. Their holy law defined spiritual health in terms of the accuracy of the scales in the marketplace. Good religion had more to do with justice for the poor and dispossessed than keep the right customs.

It was a Greek heresy that allowed early Christianity to think of itself as other-wordly; having to do with a solely spiritual Kingdom peripheral to and different from the ordinary, daily realities of life in the world. The Greeks maintained that reality is divided into two realms - spiritual and physical. In practical terms Greek dualism allows you to draw a line through the middle of your life and the life of your community and the life of the world, and call one side worldly, secular and the other side spiritual. On the secular side you can keep matters like how you vote and spend your money, how you act toward your neighbor and how you love your spouse, how you make out your taxes and how you feel about welfare recipients. On the religious side you can keep things like singing hymns, saying prayers and listening to sermons, reciting creeds: i.e. religious reality, peripheral activities, at best. When religious matters began to look secular: or more probably, when worldly matters began to fall over the line into the religious side as they have an annoying way of doing - say when someone steals the election and not only personal integrity but the integrity of the whole system is in question - or innocent bystanders start dying because of the people we are arming to protect Texas from Communism, or when elderly people suffer not only the indignities of loneliness and despair but malnutrition and unnecessary sickness because our society can't afford old people, you and I are inclined to make that little line into a wall and say "Religion and politics don't mix." That kind of thinking allowed members of the S. S. to go to church on Sunday and operate gas chambers on Monday morning, or more immediately it allows us to regard hunger in our community as a problem in economics, and the murderbus.

realities of a single mother trying to raise four small children on the eleventh floor of a tenement building where the elevators don't work and the stairways are full of filth and rodents - basically a real estate problem, and the dilemma of the homeless thousands wandering around the streets and sleeping in the doorways of Chicago as a sociological problem. And we could get away with that Hellenistic nonsense except for Palm Sunday, the day when an adamant young man took the holy love of God and marched it right into the political and economic as well as the religious heart of the city and there was crucified.

At least once a year, on Palm Sunday, we ought to hear Sir George MacLeod's eloquent words:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as the steeple of the church...Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap: at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where church people ought to be and what church people should be about."

The imperative of this celebration soon to be an execution is to know again, perhaps for the first time, how totally God loves this world and this city. The imperative is know that God takes the human city very seriously, that what happens in the human city is of value and concern to God.

The imperative is to know again that an adamant young man rode into a city to demonstrate with a terrible eloquence that there is no where in human life that stands outside the love of God.

The imperative is to affirm our own being, as he did, in acts of lonely courage; to join the fight, to decide what we think is right and to throw in on that side: to stop being spectators and to get involved. The imperative is to take some chances not only because the world desperately needs people who care like that but because our own souls are at stake.

"Behold him who comes in the name of the Lord." See this Christ, this adamant young man, who penetrates to the center, who comes to the heart: to your heart and mine, that is to say. He is not content with the periphery. He will not remain on the edges. He comes to the center and today requires a response. The invitation is to care deeply and love bravely, to stumble along behind that parade, to pull a branch from a tree and the coat from your back for him, and in whatever voice you have to sing your Hallelujahs - because on this day the Gospel promises, if you and I don't, if we miss it, the very stones will cry out...

Blessing and glory,
and wisdom and thanksgiving,
and honor and power and might
be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.